Making a difference, differently

Ten years ago, after 2 years as a postdoc, I found myself wondering whether I should take a different road. Up to that point, I had stuck to a pretty traditional path investigating cancer genetics, but the research grind had taken its toll and my interest was waning. At the same time, federal funding had flattened, and the scarcity of secure, long-term employment in academic research added to my dissatisfaction. So I decided to take the leap and leave the typical academic path to find a better match. Then came the hard part: identifying a new career that would nurture my passion for science and allow me to make an impact with my work. I found it in a place many would not expect: a 2-year community college.

As I was considering my options, I found inspiration in my first graduate school research mentor, Randal Wada, whose work reminded me that scientists’ efforts away from the bench can be incredibly powerful. In addition to developing neuroblastoma therapies, Randy had created the Hawaii Cord Blood Bank, which helps improve stem cell transplant matches for bone marrow recipients. His work made me realize that I could serve science and society in lots of ways if I simply opened my mind.

But I still didn’t know exactly what I should do. Then a second bit of inspiration came my way. A colleague mentioned that a professor at a nearby 2-year college was training students to produce monoclonal antibodies for labs on campus and for paying clients. I was impressed that the professor, John Berestecky, had taken on this type of ambitious project with relatively inexperienced students. Curious to find out more, I set up a meeting with John and was struck by his sincerity and the way he prioritized student training above grants, publications, and personal ambition. I could also see his passion for teaching, which reminded me of my own back when I started college, planning to become a high school biology teacher. Since graduate school I had not thought about teaching, let alone working at a 2-year college—many of my research mentors and peers considered it career suicide—but meeting John made me see things differently.

Here, at last, was a way to fuse my interest in science with my passion for teaching. I found a faculty position and joined John at the same quiet junior college in the middle of the Pacific. Now, I effectively hold two positions: classroom instructor and research co-adviser of 15 inexperienced but eager undergraduates. Both roles give me a chance to help students transform themselves, which is enormously rewarding. They learn lab skills and concepts impressively fast, and it’s gratifying to see them gain confidence in their abilities. The deeper emotional connections I have forged with students over the years have been unexpected gifts that continually inspire me.

My work has its challenges. It’s disheartening when others see both my students and me as less worthy because we are not at universities. We sometimes struggle to get access to adequate research space, federal funding, scientific conferences, and other resources and opportunities. Because my students are novices, investigating complex biomedical questions requires creativity and restraint. Long-range projects take even longer than they would in other settings because students leave for universities just as their skill sets have finally matured. My pay is below the standard at 4-year research institutions, even though my teaching workload is greater. But my occasional frustration is buffered by the thought of the students, many of whom are considered underrepresented minorities, that I have helped train.

Looking back at these 10 years, I realize how much my work on this campus has helped me grow, both as an academic and a mentor, just as it has for many of my students. For my sake as much as for theirs, I’m grateful that I stepped away from a prescribed career path and found a way to serve both the student and research communities in my own way, modest though it may be.

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Science 354 (6316), 1194.
DOI: 10.1126/science.354.6316.1194

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